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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on one of the central concepts of Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy of language: his theory of the utterance as speech genre. Before exploring speech genres, the paper discusses Bakhtin's ideas concerning language--both language as a general system, and the use of language as particular speech communication. The paper considers Bakhtin's work as an extreme reaction against Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between "langue" and "parole" (still popular in many language skills and rhetorical technique textbooks). It also discusses the three factors Bakhtin lists as integral in any complete and final utterance: (1) referential and semantic exhaustiveness of the theme; (2) the speaker's motivation and plan; and (3) typical or generic (culturally understood) forms of finalization. The paper concludes that although Bakhtin's theories present problems, he shows amazing insight into the uses of language and speech genres. (NKA)

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# The Utterance as Speech Genre

# in

# Mikhail Bakhtin's Philosophy of Language

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Several of the essays that Mikhail Bakhtin originally published as *Voprosy literaturi i estetiki* were later translated and appeared in *The Dialogic Imagination.* It was in reference to these essays that Bakhtin wrote:

> The unity of the emerging (developing) idea. Hence a certain internal open-endedness of many of my ideas. But I do not wish to turn shortcomings into virtues: in these works there is much external open-endedness, that is, an open endedness not of the thought itself but of its expression and exposition. Sometimes it is difficult to separate one open-endedness from another (Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970-71" 155).

This open-endedness is indeed apparent, not only in the essays which appear in The Dialogic Imagination, but in many of Bakhtin's other writings. However, the polyphony which exists within and between each of Bakhtin's works serves to reduce the problems which are potential in any appraisal of his ideas. This article will focus on one of the central concepts of Bakhtin's philosophy of language: his theory of the utterance as speech genre.

Before exploring speech genres, it is necessary to briefly discuss Bakhtin's ideas concerning language - both language as a general system, and the use of language as particular speech communication. While Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* is still popular in many language-skills and rhetorical technique textbooks, much of Bakhtin's work is an extreme reaction against Saussure's model. Saussure wrote:

> In separating language from speaking we are at the same time separating: 1) what is social from what is individual; and 2) what is essential from what is accessory and more or less accidental. Language is not a function of the speaker; it is a product that is passively assimilated by the

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> individual. It never requires premeditation, and reflection enters in only for the purpose of classification... (Saussure 14).

According to Susan Stewart, "No position could be more the antithesis of Bakhtin's" (Stewart 42). For Saussure, language is an "essential" system that is superordinate to any particular individual who might make use of it. Bakhtin recognizes the importance of language as a "code" by which we are able to understand one another, but, more importantly, language only becomes significant in a dialogical, communicative context. Without the addressive, responsive dialogue of communication, language for Bakhtin is essentially dead. It is dialogue which linguists, Saussure among them, typically ignore. Bakhtin writes:

> The subject of linguistics is only the material, only the means of speech communication, and not speech communication itself, not utterances in their essence and not the relationships among them (dialogic), not the forms of speech communication, and not speech genres. Linguistics studies only the relationships among elements within the language systems, not the relationships among utterances and not the relations of utterances to reality and to the speaker (author) (Bakhtin, "The Problem of the Text" 118).

Bakhtin recognizes the importance of the individual, but only as a purely social construct. While Saussure wants to separate the individual from the social, Bakhtin asserts that it is society which forms the individual, and, since this is the case, the social and the particular agent are truly inseparable:

> Everything that pertains to me enters my consciousness, beginning with my name, from the external world through the mouths of others (my mother, and so forth), with their intonation, in their emotional and value-assigning tonality. I realize myself initially through others: from them I receive words, forms, and tonalities for the formation of my initial idea of

> myself. The elements of infantilism in self-awareness... sometimes remain until the end of life (perception and the idea of one's self, one's body, face, and past in tender tones). Just as the body is formed initially in the mothers womb (body), a person's consciousness awakens wrapped in another's consciousness (Bakhtin, "From Notes Made in 1970-71" 138).

But Bakhtin's disagreement with Saussure goes even deeper. He especially opposes the idea that communication is a "one-way" process -- a message which travels from an active speaker to a passive listener. In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin says that, "a passive understanding of linguistic meaning is no understanding at all, it is only the abstract aspect of meaning" (Bakhtin, in The Dialogic Imagination 281). For Bakhtin, the process of communication is much more dynamic; it requires activity not just by the speaker, but also by the listener. In describing his conception of the listener's role, Bakhtin writes:

> The fact is that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution, and so on. And the listener adopts this responsive attitude for the entire duration of the process of listening and understanding... (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" 68).

At the heart of Bakhtin's philosophy of speech communication is his conception of the utterance. It is the "real unit of speech communication." For Bakhtin, the boundaries of the utterance are "determined by a change of speaking subjects" (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" 71). This change of speaking subjects is the first feature which separates speech communication from language systems. Any utterance is made within the context of an expectation of an immediate or delayed response by an active listener or reader. Thus, an

utterance might consist of one word, as in the case, for example, of a military command. The military leader makes a command with the absolute intention of an immediate response by a listener or group of listeners. On the other hand, an utterance may be as long as a multi-volume novel. In this case, the author's intention is to invoke a response from a reader, though it need not be an immediate response; the response may be delayed for a considerable time. In addition, response may not involve agreement by the reader. What it does require is an active, dialogic involvement with the novel. When the author has completed a work, he or she, in essence, relinquishes the floor so that the reader's active response may take place.

Bakhtin admits that an analysis of the novel as an utterance is extremely involved and complex. Perhaps this is why dialogue between two agents has become the classic model or paradigm for linguists, philologists, and rhetoricians. Communication in dialogue is simply easier to describe using words or the now-standard schematic representations. However, there is no general agreement concerning the root or foundation of meaning. Some linguists, for example, see the phoneme as the foundation of meaning, while others believe meaning "resides" in the word, sentence, or even paragraph. These are all artificial categories for Bakhtin. Linguists regard these distinct units only as they are formulated according to the intentions of speakers. They focus upon language as a monologic system and, like Saussure, ignore the dialogic nature of response. For Bakhtin, there can be no purely monologic meaning (though he recognizes that some utterances approach monologism), since meaning must always occur in a dialogic negotiation between an active speaker and an active listener. Following is a rather lengthy, but very cogent explanation by Bakhtin:

> Let us return to real-life dialogue. As we have said, this is the simplest and the most classic form of speech communication. The change of

> speaking subjects (speakers) that determines the boundaries of the utterance is especially clear here. But in other spheres of speech communication as well, including areas of complexly organized cultural communication (scientific and artistic), the nature of the boundaries of the utterance remains the same.
>
> Complexly structured and specialized works of various scientific and artistic genres, in spite of all the ways in which they differ from rejoinders in dialogue, are by nature the same kind of units of speech communication. They, too, are clearly demarcated by a change of speaking subjects, and these boundaries, while retaining their external clarity, acquire here a special internal aspect because the speaking subject -- in this case, the author of the work -- manifests his own individuality in his style, his world view, and in all aspects of the design of his work. This imprint of individuality marking the work also creates special internal boundaries that distinguish this work from other works connected with it in the overall processes of speech communication in that particular cultural sphere: from the works of predecessors on whom the author relies, from other works of the same school, from the works of opposing schools with which the author is contending, and so on.
>
> The work, like the rejoinder in dialogue, is oriented toward the response of the other (others), toward his active responsive understanding, which can assume various forms: educational influence on the readers, persuasion of their critical responses, influence on followers and successors, and so on. It can determine others' responsive positions under the complex conditions of speech communication in a particular cultural sphere (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" 75-76).

According to Bakhtin, speech communication consists of this active negotiation. Language systems merely provide a somewhat standardized, generic form by which a

speaker and a listener may be mutually anticipated and recognized. It is the change of speaking subjects that provides the frame for an utterance and delimits it from related utterances.

The second feature of the utterance as an element of speech communication involves Bakhtin's concept of finalization. It is related to the change of speakers, but involves the "inner side of the change of speech subjects" (agents):

> This change can only take place because the speaker has said (or written) everything he wishes to say at a particular moment or under particular circumstances. When hearing of reading, we clearly sense the end of the utterance, as if we hear the speaker's concluding dixi. This finalization is specific and is determined by special criteria. The first and foremost criterion for the finalization of the utterance is the possibility of responding to it or, more precisely and broadly, of assuming a responsive attitude toward it (for example, executing an order). This criterion is met by a short everyday question, for example, "What time is it?" (one may respond to it), an everyday request that one may or may not fulfill, a specific statement with which one may agree or disagree (partially or completely), or a novel, which can be evaluated as a whole. Some kind of finalization is necessary to be able to react to an utterance. It is not enough for the utterance to be understood in terms of language. An absolutely understood and completed sentence, if it is a sentence and not an utterance comprised of one sentence, cannot evoke a responsive reaction; it is comprehensible, but it is still not all. This "all" -- the indicator of the wholeness of the utterance -- is subject neither to grammatical nor to abstract semantic definition (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" 76).

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Bakhtin lists three factors which are integral in any complete and finalized utterance: 1) referential and semantic exhaustiveness of the theme; 2) the speaker's motivation and plan, and; 3) typical or generic -- culturally understood -- forms of finalization. Although Bakhtin describes these factors at great length, it will not be necessary to present the details of all of them at this time. I have endeavored to make the lists as descriptive and self-evident as possible.

The most important of these factors is the third. With this element, we return to the fundamental discussion of speech genres. While particular utterances are remarkably diverse and heterogeneous, "each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these utterances. These we may call speech genres" (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" 60).

Speech genres range from short and direct commands to journalistic genres to literary and rhetorical genres. Each "sphere of activity" develops its own, often immensely complex "repertoire of speech genres..." which "differentiate and grow as the particular sphere develops and becomes more complex" (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" 60).

Certain spheres, (and here Bakhtin lists rhetoric as one of many examples), have become standardized over time. The problem is, according to Bakhtin, that, as these spheres become highly standardized, reflected individuality and, to some extent, dialogism, is sacrificed. Without individual style, language becomes nothing more than a tool which is used only with the intention to conform to rigidly prescribed forms. Thus, in speech genres such as those involving various sorts of business documents, military commands, or teacher talk, "only the most superficial, almost biological aspects of individuality" are reflected (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres 63). In the case of rhetoric, the

individual will or voice of the speaker has been overpowered by standard rhetorical forms (forms which, according to Bakhtin have not changed much for several centuries) available for use. The same is true for the epic:

We speak of the epic as a genre that has come down to use already well defined and real. We come upon it when it is already completely finished, a congealed and half-moribund genre. Its completedness, its consistency and its absolute lack of artistic naivete bespeak its old age as a genre and its lengthy past. We can only conjecture about this past, and we must admit that so far our conjectures have been rather poor (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in The Dialogic Imagination 14).

In other speech genres that have not become overly standardized, however, there is a real opportunity for dialogue to occur. Bakhtin believes literary-artistic genres, (in particular, the novel) are very important here, precisely because they are non-standard, fluid, and constantly evolving in form. In addition to the novel, Bakhtin recognizes the importance of other speech genres that perform dialogic, communicative functions within a multiplicity of spheres. Of course, Bakhtin has already said that speech genres are relatively stable kinds of utterances within the context of particular spheres.

This points to a potential problem, (which polyphony has not reduced), in attempting to understand Bakhtin's theories of language and communication. He does not adequately differentiate between the "overly standardized" (thus dead), and the "relatively stable." It seems as though Bakhtin's argument is grounded in the abstract difference in degree between standard and stable.

In the case of rhetoric, for example, it seems entirely reasonable that an individual could make use of "standard" rhetorical techniques in order to elicit the response of agreement, and, perhaps, action from an audience. If the goal

or motivation of the speaker is to elicit response, his or her utterance must be, according to Bakhtin's own definition, an example of truly dialogic communication. It will not be hard to imagine situations in which individuals use rhetorical techniques as ends in themselves, (the student who is required to present a persuasive speech to his or her class might be one example). Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept that most rhetorical techniques are used simply for the sake of using them. Perhaps they are frequently used because they help to increase the likelihood of a favorable response from the audience.

Although Bakhtin's theories present problems, he also shows amazing insight into the uses of language and speech genres. Long before sociolinguistics gained the popularity and importance that it has today, Bakhtin wrote:

> Many people who have an excellent command of a language often feel quite helpless in certain spheres of communication precisely because they do not have a practical command of the generic forms used in the given spheres. Frequently a person who has an excellent command of speech in some areas of cultural communication, who is able to read a scholarly paper or engage in a scholarly discussion, who speaks very well on social questions, is silent or very awkward in social conversation. Here it is not a matter of an impoverished vocabulary or of style, taken abstractly; this is entirely a matter of the inability to command a repertoire of genres of social conversation, the lack of a sufficient supply of those ideas about the whole of the utterance that help to cast one's speech quickly and naturally in certain compositional and stylistic forms, the inability to grasp a word promptly, to begin and end correctly...
>
> The better our command of genres, the more freely we employ them, the more fully and clearly we reveal our own individuality in them (where this is possible and necessary), the more flexibly and precisely we reflect the unrepeatable situation of communication - in a word, the more perfectly we

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> implement our free speech plan (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" 80).

Sociolinguists have historically attempted to study and describe social influences on purely monologic language (word usage, or sentence structure, for example), but until recently they have not focused upon dialogic utterances and the factors that determine speech genres; nor have they examined the ways in which speech genres influence the larger language system. Perhaps statements like the one with which this essay concludes have helped the field of sociolinguistics to become open to entirely new areas of study:

> It seems to us that a study of the nature of the utterance and of speech genres is of fundamental importance for overcoming those simplistic notions about speech life, about the so-called speech flow, about communication and so forth -ideas which are still current in our language studies. Moreover, a study of the utterance as a real unit of speech communion will also make it possible to understand more correctly the nature of language units (as a system): words and sentences (Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres" 67).

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